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ABSTRACT

A suspension school for secondary students, established in the 1977-78 school year in an Arkansas school district has developed specific program goals and procedures. Following a discussion of the school's origins, this paper describes operating procedures, philosophy, support system, and student reaction. Suspensions declined considerably through the 1982-83 school year; they have increased somewhat since then but the size of the district has also steadily increased. A student's "sentence" at the school is determined by the principal. Individual programs are planned around school hours. After the student attends the minimum days required, a conference by student, parents, and principal reviews the student progress and decides if the student is ready to return to regular classes. Personnel strive for goals that include serving educational needs, providing a secure home base, promoting discipline, building positive self-image, and guiding students toward responsibility. In the view of school administrators, community support is a primary need in a suspension school program, and should involve a variety of organizations committed to serving local youth. Support from school organizations, personnel, and parents prevents the school from becoming isolated. Most students at the school face what they consider to be reasonable punishment and complete their assignments. The likelihood of a student returning once again is about one in four: the prospect of more returns diminishes rapidly thereafter. (CJH)

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THE SUSPENSION SCHOOL: AN ALTERNATIVE TO SUSPENSION

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THE SUSPENSION SCHOOL: AN ALTERNATIVE TO SUSPENSION

Introduction

Forrest City Special School District #7 is headquartered in Forrest City, Arkansas, a city of approximately 13,800 people, located an hour's drive from Memphis and two hours from Little Rock on Interstate 40. Although the area is predominantly agricultural, in recent years considerable industrialization has taken place there. Roughly three-fourths of the parents of Forrest City school children have a high school education or less while about one in eight has a college degree. Approximately sixty percent of the district's students are black and forty percent white. About three-fourths of the students are bussed to school.

During the 1977-78 school year approximately 1200 students were suspended from the junior and senior high schools (7th-12th grades) for disciplinary reasons. At that time, suspension quite often meant that the student would be turned loose, without supervision, on the community. For some that meant a vacation away from school, while for others it meant an opportunity for mischief, or worse, crime.

Mr. Samuel Johnson, Secondary Supervisor for Curriculum and Instruction (then Personnel Coordinator), was concerned with the high suspension rate and initiated the Suspension School. Essentially, the idea was to provide a location away from the campus where disruptive students could continue their school work without disturbing others and at the same time be disciplined for the original infractions.

Mr. Johnson worked with Mr. James Evansingston to set up the program. Evansingston had worked under Johnson as a science teacher, coach, advanced placement supervisor, and as assistant principal, and in the process had developed a reputation as a strong disciplinarian. The two decided that the school should not be a "fun place", not too comfortable, and should be isolated, all to emphasize the fact that the students were being disciplined. A building was located on the campus of one of the elementary schools approximately two miles away from the junior/senior high school campus. The structure was an old home economics building with few, if any, amenities. The building was so Spartan, in fact, that students often referred to it as "Sing-Sing", partly because of the study-hall environment and partly as a play on Evansingstons' name.

Initially, only two people were involved in the operation: Evansingston and Teacher's Aide Ellen Campbell. The two processed and taught 722 suspended students that year (78-79), down from the 1200 of the year before. This dramatic decline in suspensions indicated that the word had apparently circulated quickly.

The following year the team added a full-time social worker, a position now filled by Mr. George Pettigrew. In addition, they were provided the services of a CETA worker, now Miss Sandra Walker, for secretarial aid. That year (79-80) suspensions dropped to 583.

Since that year suspensions declined to a low of 459 in 82-83. They have been increasing somewhat since then to an 85-86 figure of 607. It should be noted that the size of the district has also been steadily increasing, growing twelve percent in the last ten years.

Operating Procedure

A student may win a trip to "Sing-Sing" for one or more of the following reasons: fighting, general misconduct, truancy, insubordination, profanity, drugs (including marijuana and alcohol), theft, and weapons possession. Once identified for such an infraction, the student is "sentenced" by the principal of that school to the suspension school. Students are suspended for a minimum number of days, set by the principal, and will be required to attend for at least that number of days. Subsequent trips may net longer sentences. Students are not released until Evansingston is convinced of their readiness to return to regular classes. When it is thought necessary to extend a suspension past the number of specified days, Evansingston and the suspending principal will determine if the extension should be made.

Students report to the Suspension School the day following their suspensions. Upon arrival, the students are interviewed and tentative daily individual programs are planned. The students are expected to maintain regular school hours and attendance is mandatory. Written excuses are required for absences although the days students are absent are not credited toward their sentences. Daily activities include scheduled time for study of the subjects in which the student is enrolled. A daily assignment sheet is provided by the students' regular teachers, so that Suspension School instructors may provide assignments for the suspended students to keep them abreast of what is happening in their regular classes so that they will not be lost when they return to the classroom.

After a student has been at the Suspension School at least the minimum number of days set by the suspending principal, he or she may be recommended for readmittance to classes. At that time, a conference is arranged with the student, parents, and principal. The Suspension School instructor prepares a progress report on the student and submits it to the principal. Recommendation for return is based on the student's progress rather than number of days spent in the Suspension School.

Philosophy

The Suspension School is concerned with students' intellectual, personal, social-societal, and physical development. In pursuit of these aims, School personnel attempt to accomplish the following goals:

1. To serve the educational needs of the suspended students.
2. To provide a secure home-base arrangement for each student.
3. To promote understanding of the importance of good discipline.
4. To build a positive self-image and a basic set of values.
5. To guide the students to accept more responsibility for their learning.
6. To encourage constructive use of leisure time.
7. To create an effective school climate that encourages respect and harmony.
8. To carry on continuous evaluation.

Support System

As mentioned earlier, Evansingston is a strong disciplinarian, a necessary ingredient for success in the Suspension School program. There are several other requisites to which those persons interested in duplicating the program should attend. Community support is probably the primary external need. Evansingston recommends contacting local community agencies such as the local Youth Department, Juvenile Services, regional Mental Health Department, local law enforcement agencies, and other organizations committed to serving local youth. They need to be informed of the purpose of the School and given the opportunity to invest in it by involvement. Evansingston makes use of a Foster Grandparents program, for example, to provide extra help in the way of tutors and observers for the School. Local police and sheriffs' departments sometimes contact Evansingston for information about former Suspension School enrollees. Occasionally, he has to call upon them for help with a particularly unruly student.

In addition, it is very important to have the support of the school board, the superintendent, parent-teacher organizations, principals, counselors, and other school personnel. A conscious effort must be made on the part of the supervisor to gain their support, lest the school's isolation causes it to be ignored or forgotten.

Student Reaction

Students generally do not look forward to attending the Suspension School. Some attempt to go to other school districts and enroll or simply drop out altogether. Fortunately, they represent only a small percentage of the district's students. Most do face what they ordinarily consider to be reasonable punishment for their misdoings and attempt to complete their assignments as required, and on time. Once done, the likelihood of their returning one more time is about one in four with the prospects of more returns diminishing quickly thereafter. Seventh through tenth graders are the most likely candidates for Suspension School. Far less eleventh graders and almost no seniors are sent to the "White House".

Interestingly, there are a few students who prefer the Suspension School over their regular classes. They claim that they like the environment: the people are nice, they are able to work without noise and hassles from other students, and they do not have to change classes and walk from building to building. While there are these few students, most feel that the workload is more than adequate and are anxious to avoid another trip to Sing-Sing.